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Gets Its Act Together

By STEVEN R. WEISMAN

WASHINGTON — Carter Administration conduct of foreign policy has sometimes tended to be disorderly, as in the case of former Ambassador Andrew Young's unauthorized meetings at the United Nations with Palestine Liberation Organization officials. By contrast, in dealing with Iran, the President's advisers have displayed an unusual degree of unity. There have been almost no signs of internal discord, and secrecy has been tightly maintained on sensitive actions such as unannounced messages to the Teheran authorities and undisclosed military moves bolstering the announced buildup.

Mr. Carter tells White House visitors that he has never seen his foreign policy machinery function so smoothly. Despite differing approaches to world politics, participants are unanimous in assigning priority to the plight of the hostages. White House officials say. But they also suggest that with Iran, the Administration's "crisis management" operation has come into its own.

From the moment the United States Embassy was seized in Teheran on Nov. 4, the President issued orders to avoid the disarray — and appearance of disarray — that characterized Iran policy a year ago. Then, the Administration shifted fitfully from unswerving support of the Shah to conciliation of "moderate" forces struggling to bring him down, followed by a period of recrimination over the inadequacy of American intelligence and foresight in Iran.

The primary vehicle for crisis management is the Special Coordination Committee of the National Security Council — a working group of top aides presided over by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser. Their discussions in the windowless, woodpaneled Situation Room in the White House basement open with the domestic, legal, economic and energy-related aspects of the crisis. Then, they turn to security and diplomatic issues — secret maneuvers and the channels of communication, however tenuous, with the Iranian revolutionary Government. Those present without a direct interest — the President's domestic advisers — leave the room at this point, underlining the insistence on secrecy.

Mr. Carter set up the Special Coordination Committee early in 1977 as a subgroup of the National Security Council. During the eight-week Iran crisis, the parent N.S.C. — Mr. Carter, Vice President Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of Central Intelligence — has met fewer than a half dozen times. The S.C.C. meets almost every morning, briskly hurrying through a fixed agenda. The members include security aides, and Hamilton Jordan, White House chief of staff; Jody Powell, the press secretary; Treasury Secretary G. William Miller; Charles W. Duncan Jr., Secretary of Energy; White House counsel Lloyd Cutler; domestic affairs adviser Stuart E. Eizenstat, and Hedley W. Donovan, senior adviser to the President.

Mr. Brzezinski's staff types up the minutes for President Carter every day, allowing space for him to write notes in the margin and to ratify decisions by checking a box marked "agree" or "disagree." By

ceiving copies of the minutes, even at the next day's meeting when they are read aloud with the President's comments. They are kept in a fat gray loose-leaf notebook on Mr. Brzezinski's desk.

"The President wanted more discipline, and he wanted Brzezinski to exercise it on his behalf," said a senior official. "When he approved the compartmentalization of the meetings, he made it possible to enforce that discipline. He was determined that this

crisis be run by him directly, and he laid down the rules that everybody has accepted."

"When you think about it, it's absolutely amazing that there have been so few leaks," another official said. Last Nov. 20, for example, when the White House issued its strong warning against putting the hostages on trial — implying a threat of military retaliation — a private message in much stronger terms was conveyed at the same time through diplomatic channels. It warned the Iranians of "grave consequences" if trials took place. "They understood that doesn't mean economic consequences," an aide said. Existence of this note did not become known until recently, and officials say there are several other such communications, still secret. The United States is also understood to have taken several, undisclosed military maneuvers beyond those announced "so that if we had to take military action, we'd be in a position to do it," the aide added.

The White House precautions seem to have found a counterpart American news organizations' restraint. Several have compiled lists of the hostages in Teheran, but few have publicized them, at least in full. The State Department has refused to confirm names, contending that "would not be in the best interests" of the hostages and their families.

Replying to suggestions that S.C.C. secrecy policy may deprive them of fresh viewpoints, White House officials point to task forces under the committee's jurisdiction designed to explore alternatives, bringing to the President the thinking of outsiders, including academic experts and others with thoughts about the psychology of the Iranian revolutionary leaders.

The liveliest debates, one participant said, have not concerned particular tactics, but rather "basic assumptions." These, he said, go beyond the geopolitical ramifications of United States actions in the Middle East, to such questions as the rationality of the Iranian authorities. "Our basic operating assumption all along is that the Iranian leaders are rational, that the holding of the hostages is not the most important thing in the world to them — that there is a cost beyond which they wouldn't go in order to keep the hostages," this official said. "But how can you be sure that assumption is correct?"

Secrecy has had its drawbacks, however, in making the Administration's case to the American public. For one, American officials disagree with a public perception that virtually none of their efforts have produced tangible results. One top official said the President was convinced, from information provided by diplomatic intermediaries, that the Iranians had in fact responded to American threats of military action and, as a result, had deferred action on trials of the hostages. Whatever evidence there may be for this assertion has been withheld, however.